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AUTHOR Cosgrove, Maryellen S.
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ABSTRACT

Learning centers are areas in a classroom, such as a corner in the room, that define a specific focus or afford a unique learning opportunity. Learning takes place when students reinforce skills by using the skills in interesting, meaningful, relevant, and social contexts. Learning centers can aid this reinforcement by giving students opportunities to participate in thought-provoking activities and by stimulating curiosity within a cooperative setting. Learning centers serve both a curriculum-centered and a child-centered approach to learning. Learning center activities can be organized by skills, novel interests, or integrated themes. Thematic centers are usually the most popular for teachers and students alike. Many center activities are game-like in nature, focusing on luck rather than ability. All center activities should include an objective, a set of directions, and a means of evaluation. Space availability, time constraints, and student movement all will affect the organization of learning centers. Learning centers offer another way to incorporate portfolio assessment into the classroom. The teacher must also carefully evaluate the effectiveness of the individual learning centers. Thus, with organization and creativity, learning centers can be a valuable addition to classrooms. (HB)

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INSIDE LEARNING CENTERS

Maryellen S. Cosgrove, Ph.D.

> All I really need to know about how to live and what to do and how to be I learned in kindergarten. ... These are the things I have learned:
>
> Share everything.
>
> Play fair.
>
> Don't hit people.
>
> Put things back where you found them.
>
> Clean up your own mess.
>
> Don't take things that aren't yours.
>
> Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.
>
> ... Live a balanced life - learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work some every day some. (Fulghum, 1986, p. 4)

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Robert Fulghum may have been writing about kindergarten but unknowingly he was also describing the rationale behind the use of learning centers in ALL grades.

Actually though, the roots of learning centers can be found in the works of educators of young children, such as Pestalozzi who believed that children learn through direct interaction with other children and the environment; Dewey

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who emphasized learning by doing; and Montessori who maintained that children learn through tasks and carefully prepared teaching materials.

I recognize that teaching is an art as well as a science and is an intensely personal matter. It is about people influencing people in a manner that is enjoyable and comfortable for both. There is no best single way for doing it and this is also true for developing learning centers.

You have different teaching styles, methods, and procedure. Your students have different learning styles, needs and interests. Your classrooms are all physically unique. Therefore all your centers - curriculum, organization, and management - will be different.

However, we all know that teaching is a science of best practice also. Most, if not all of us, utilize some type of direct instruction but we must keep in mind that this is merely the first step in the learning process. Learning takes place when the students reinforce the skills by using them in interesting, meaningful, relevant and social contexts. This is where and why learning centers enter the instructional scene. They can extend learning by being interesting, meaningful, relevent, and social to the learners because they will give students opportunities to participate in thought-provoking activivites and stimulate curiosity to learn within a cooperative setting. Learning centers capitalize on the inherent social nature of the classroom by encouraging students to communicate, share projects and jointly solve real problems while meeting individual needs, styles, interests and curriculum demands.

A common goal of most educators and a common expecta-

tion for most future employers is the development of responsible, independent thinkers. Learning centers provide students with the opportunity to make decisions and take responsibility for their actions. This occurs every time students select a center, follow the directions, and then return the activity back to the way it was found for the next group.

The pendalum of educational practices historically swing back and forth between essentialistic and progressivistic philosophies (curriculum centered vs. child centered). The use of learning centers is an attempt to stablize this pendalum - yes the curriculum is taught and yes the child's needs are met. Some teachers are still hesitant, though, to use learning centers but they are usually the ones on opposite ends of the continuum- those who fear chaos and those who fear stifling the child. Learning centers are an attempt to bring these opposing ends together because they are organized and yet permit the child to make choices.

So what are learning centers? They are areas (a corner in the room or even a desk) that defines a specific focus or affords an unique learning opportunity not otherwide possible in the classroom. Learning centers divide a room in such a way that allows students to make choices, move freely, grow in areas of need and work together. They in themselves are experiences in learning. They are NOT busy work, tests or mindless play.

Learning center activities can be organized by skills, novel interests, and/or integrated themes. By skills I mean practice within specific areas such as math, computer or library skills. By interests I mean an extension of the

curriculum to include topics such as sports, photography, or architecture (concepts that are not in the curriculum yet will extend critical thinking). By theme I mean organizing activities around a specific curriculum objective but also encompassing other content areas.

Thematic learning centers are usually the most popular for teachers and students alike. They integrate the curriculum by expanding concepts beyond the theme to other content areas. Here are a few guidelines to help plan your thematic learning centers:

1. Select a theme topic such as dinosaurs, community helpers, plants, author, or even letter recognition.
2. Decide when the theme topic will be taught - September, January, May???
3. What skills will your students need additional practice in other content areas - L.A., Math, Science, Social Studies, Creative Arts?
4. Plan activities that students can enjoy in small groups while emphasizing the theme topic.

For example a kindergarten teacher wants to emphasize the letter sound relationship of "P" in learning centers:

1. manipulate and count /P/ objects,
2. look at the dictionary and list /P/ words,
3. listen or recite "Peter Peter Pumpkin Eater",
4. cut out /P/ pictures from the newspaper,
5. make a collage from pink paper, purple pipe cleaners, and pine needles,
6. prepare popcorn (and of course eat it!).

In the classroom next door, the children may be learning about dinosaurs so the teacher prepares the following:

1. place pictures of dinosaurs into alphabetical order,
2. solve word problems using dinosaur manipulatives,
3. sort dinosaurs into categories,
4. locate dinosaur habitats on a world map,
5. create dinosaur fossils with clay.

Many center activities are also game-like in nature thereby indicating to the players that a loss is not due to lack of ability but rather to a lack of luck. Universal board games can be created from many computer programs as well as adapting boards from unused games. For example, your students may have outgrown CANDY LAND but recycle the board by substituting math fact cards for the candy cards. Don't forget the "suspense cards" too like "move ahead two spaces". Matrix boards (checkers and bingo), card games (concentration, Old Maid) and puzzles can easily be adapted to fit into your theme, too. Games do not take up too much space either. They can easily be stored in file folders.

All center activities (skills, interest, themes) include an objective (what the children will learn as a result of using the center activity), directions (how the children will learn the objective) and evaluation (how the children and teacher will know when they have successfully achieved the objective). The objectives, directions, and evaluation should be clearly written for the children to understand. In order to become independent learners the students need to know:

1. what they can and should do,
2. how to do it,
3. when to do it,

4. where they should do it,

5. how and where to find the materials,

6. what to do with the completed activity,

7. how to evaluate their success, and

8. what they should do when they've finished.

So your classroom is overcrowded already. Where do you put the centers? You'll be surprised that by moving a file cabinet, portable board, book case, or scattering some rug samples around you can create usable center space that defines the specific area. Your classroom arrangements will "work" only when it is designed by you - based on your goals, the students' needs, and the physical limitations of your room. Before arranging your centers, make note of:

1. space - tables and storage

2. traffic flow - doors, windows, and desks,

3. number of people in your room - children and adults,

4. availability of equipment and materials.

How do I organize the centers in terms of time and student movement? Ideally centers should be self-selected but I suggest that you group children by needs and interests in the beginning. In Chatham Co. center time usually takes one hour so in most classes the children will use two activities with two to four children at each center. They spend approximately twenty minutes at the center which allows for clean up time and movement to the next one. Center activities must be taught directly and the routine introduced slowly but within a few weeks most teachers have their students self-selecting centers of their choice for at least one day per week (assigned on Mon. - Thurs. and self-select on Friday).

Some teachers divide the class in half and work with one group while the rest self-select centers for a half hour and then reverses the groups. Eventually many children may be able to contract for centers. Visual aids are very effective such as noting on a wheel that lists the centers on the spokes the names of the students who have selected that activity. Keep the groups flexible though or you'll end up with the dreaded Crows vs. Bluebirds ability group syndrome.

What about evaluation? Many of us are moving towards portfolio assessment and learning centers provide yet another element. Has the child successfully mastered the objective? Has the child shown independence and responsibility? Has the child worked well with other students? Record keeping can include center checklist (children sign in and out), and/or student files (activities completed). Individual conferences yield important information too - what you you done today? why? how well? did you enjoy it? why or why not?

We also need to evaluate the center's effectiveness. If a center or activity is not used or poorly used we must ask outselves if we've "sold" them on it, if the directions are clear enough, or have the children simply outgrown the activity? Teachers have found the following list helpful:

1. Did I clearly state the objective of the center?
2. Are the materials properly prepared?
3. Are the activities interesting and do they stimulate curiosity and problem solving?
4. Are the directions easy to follow?
5. Are the activities adaptable to different needs?
6. Are the activities self checking?

7. Do the students know what to do before, during, and after their time at the center?
8. Are self-control, resourcefulness, independence, good work habits nurtured?

Therefore, with some organization and creativity, learning centers can be beneficial to students, teachers, even society. Students benefit by being able to practice and review newly learned skills. Teachers benefit by being able to work with small groups of students. And society benefits by developing a cooperative, resourceful, and responsible workforce. In summary I'd like to again read from ALL I REALLY NEED TO KNOW I LEARNED IN KINDERGARTEN (or learning centers!).

> Everything you need to know is in there somewhere. The Golden Rule and love ... ecology and politics and equity and sane living. ... Think what a better world it would be if ... we had a basic policy to always put things back where we found them and to clean up our own messes. And it is still true, no matter how old you are - when you go out into the world, it is best to hold hands and stick together. (p. 6)

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M. Cosgrove
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